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## **Mass Media (TV and Radio) News and Language Learning**

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**Abstract:** Two important issues regarding the selection and preparation of TV news for language learning are: the content of the news and the linguistic difficulty. Content is described as being specialized or universal. Universal contexts are likely to be more comprehensible than specialized contexts. As for the linguistic difficulty, it consists of acoustic, lexical/syntactic and text-type difficulties. With regard to text-type, four types of spoken and visual elements are identified: symbolic, referential, schematic, and iconic. Audiovisual texts with greater iconic combinations are likely to be more comprehensible for language learning.

**Key words:** mass media, news, selection, content, linguistic difficulty

### **Introduction**

In the last few years, the output of TV news has exploded both in English and non-English speaking countries such as Iran and Japan. For example, in Iran, there are two channels broadcasting English news. One is Press TV which is broadcasted 24 hours 7 days a week in English and IRINN which is broadcasted some hours in English every day. In Japan, the satellite channel NHK 1 alone provides more than 24 hours of TV news in English each week, including the news bulletins of CNN, BBC, etc. TV news programming in English is not only a vast and growing language learning resource which provides meaningful opportunities for non-reciprocal listening but a vital and immediate alternative source of information. The pedagogical and informative aspects of news broadcasts in English may therefore often and dramatically intersect.

Although much has already been written about the pedagogical values, selecting and using mass media technologies such as video, film, and CDs in general in the second language classroom (Cooper et al., 1991; Joiner, 1990; Rubin, 1995; Stempleski & Arcario, 1992), less research has focused on the pedagogical problems of selecting and presenting TV news (Brinton & Gaskill, 1978; Cooper, 1996; Gruba, 1997; Meinhof, 1998). Regarding the increasing accessibility of TV news in English, this paper focuses on the criteria for selecting TV news stories to be used as a pedagogically valuable material for language learning. This paper mainly aims at the selection criteria for TV news stories.

The two main categories for assessing the pedagogical value of TV news are: a) background knowledge or content schemata and b) the linguistic difficulties of processing combinations of visual and auditory messages

This research is based upon a course I have taught in current affairs to a group of Iranian University EFL students, including both males and females, of intermediate proficiency (N=30). Although these students have low self-confidence with regard to their abilities to listen to authentic materials such as TV news, they are very much motivated and have a high degree of interest in this kind of authentic materials. In terms of understanding TV news, factors such as interest and motivation may be more important than linguistic ability for native and non-native speakers alike (Wodak, 1987). The class met 4 hours per week for 3 months in a foreign language context. Moreover, the responsibility for selection of materials was on the teacher.

## **TV and radio news in language learning**

Exposure to mass media news, for example, TV and radio news, the pedagogical value of such materials, and the possibility of using TV and radio news at all levels of EFL/ESL settings in order to enhance different language skills have been the focus of so many studies.

In a research conducted by Brinton and Gaskill (1978), the effect of listening to TV and radio news on improving EFL students' listening comprehension was studied. Brinton and Gaskill (1978) argue that using TV and radio news utterances as teaching material has proved effective on improving listening comprehension of EFL learners having difficulty in dealing with comprehending news utterances. However, Brinton and Gaskil do not mention any thing about the kind of news to be selected. A similar study which focused on using TV news to improve listening proficiency was also conducted by Poon (1992). In addition to the above mentioned studies, Baker (1996) also focused on the pedagogical value of TV news in EFL classes and listening comprehension. According to Baker (1996), TV and radio news can help EFL students improve their listening comprehension.

The use of fast speech such as those of TV and radio news in EFL/ESL classrooms has also been studied by some other scholars. In this regard, Cauldwell (1996) conducted a study aiming at discovering the relationship between direct encounters with fast speech such as TV and radio news and teaching listening to EFL students. Accordingly, students may have some problems coping with fast speech at first. However, EFL students can diminish these problems and improve their listening through great amount of exposure to fast speech. Another short study conducted by Mackenzie (1997) also highlighted the possibility of using TV and radio news reports at all levels of EFL learning. The study rejected the assumption that because the reporters speak too fast, the content is too complex, and the vocabulary is too difficult, TV and radio news cannot be used at lowest levels of EFL situations. Mackenzie study included some techniques to be used by the teachers while trying to use news in their classes. As the matter of fact, Mackenzie did not say anything about criteria for the selection of news. What he focused on was the use of fast news at all levels with different techniques.

Regarding proficiency and comprehension of television and radio news in a foreign language, a research by Berber (1997) highlighted the point that through enough exposure to these materials, students can easily cope with the comprehension of such materials. Cabaj and Nicolic (2000) also noted that a great amount of exposure to TV and radio news could help students to cope with TV and radio news broadcasts easier. Moreover, through exposure to TV news and radio programs students acquire the knowledge, structures, strategies, and vocabularies they can use in everyday situations.

In the same line, a study was conducted by Bell (2003) focusing on the pedagogical value and informative aspects of TV and radio news broadcasts in EFL settings. He considered background knowledge or content schemata, formal schemata, and linguistic difficulty as three broad categories for selecting any kinds of TV and radio news stories for the EFL classrooms. However, Wetzel et al. (1994), in their study, found that TV news is not always helpful in comprehension.

In short, the majority of the aforementioned descriptive and experimental works have been conducted on the pedagogical value and the effect of exposure to TV and radio news genre on promoting different language skills especially listening comprehension but none of them has specifically focused on the discovering the nature of the news to set a clear criteria for the selection of the news. This is one of the initial reasons to carry out the present study.

## **Research design**

The research design of this paper is in the tradition of the hermeneutic paradigm of naturalistic and action research (Freeman, 1998). It focuses on two modes of enquiry. First, by introspection, it seeks to make explicit the process of material selection by the teacher-researcher. This is seen as part of an ongoing process in teacher research to articulate and represent what teachers know and are learning through their work in the classroom. Second, the paper reflects upon the use of selected materials in the classroom within the framework of action research.

## **Content Schemata**

Research in cognitive science suggests that knowledge is organized in the form of schemata (Rumelhart, 1980). Weaver (1994, P.18) defines a schema as "an organized chunk of knowledge or experience, often accompanied by feelings". According to Bell (1991), Schemata aid the interpretation

of both linguistic and non-linguistic sensory data by providing a context in order to predict meaning and fill in missing information.

In second language reading research, Carrell (1983, 1984, and 1987) has highlighted the connection between comprehension and background knowledge established in first language research. Non-native readers are often unable to make the necessary connections between text and background knowledge and so tend to rely more on linguistic cues than background knowledge. In L2 listening research, several studies have noted the link between topic familiarity and comprehension (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Long, 1990; Tchaicha, 1996). The practical implication of studies of comprehension and background knowledge for the teaching of listening comprehension has been to stress the importance of activating appropriate schemata in pre-listening activities. Here, this paper is concerned with how schema theory informs the selection of TV news items and how schemata interact with context.

### **Exogenous context and endogenous context**

Exogenous contexts require prior knowledge. The nature of this prior knowledge may be specialized or universal. Specialized contexts such as Iran, Japan, or Iraq require such massive prior knowledge that even many native speakers may lack the appropriate schemata.

Endogenous contexts, such as news film of a sporting incident or natural disaster, require little or no prior knowledge in that they create their own contexts (although, of course, learners will need the appropriate vocabulary to be able to talk about what they see happening in the video sequence). In other words, the visuals speak for themselves.

Of course, individual TV news items may be made up of degrees of exogenous and endogenous contexts. According to Cooper (1996), episodic news stories are dependent on knowledge of the previous events in the story and so put special conditions on comprehension. Similarly non-episodic news items, while not requiring knowledge of a prior story, may still require large amounts of background knowledge.

In news items which required more declarative knowledge, the media literacy of individual students became a more important factor in understanding.

From this discussion, certain pedagogical implications for material selection emerge. Endogenous contexts are likely to be the most exploitable type of news story in the language classroom, but such contexts are likely to account for a small fraction of the news items in any one bulletin. TV news items with universal exogenous contexts, though somewhat less accessible to students, are likely to be far more available. A key factor is the degree to which students can empathize with such items through their own experiences, for example having a bike accident or having a bike stolen, etc. In this case, the participants in this study showed their interest in TV news items with universal exogenous contexts more.

It is important to remember that schemata are socially constructed and therefore often culturally specific mental categories into which events and individuals are sorted. Although Japanese and Iranians may share the mental category of carry-on luggage, the content of that category may vary. Carry-on luggage in Iran may be stereotypically associated with the frustration of flying brought on by both the need to carry on as much luggage as possible and the inadequacy of the space provided. From the Japanese perspective, carry-on luggage may be considered a convenience and passengers feel obliged to allow others space for their carry-on items. News items with imputed universal appeal may therefore facilitate understanding not only with regard to the discourse under study but on the larger level of cross-cultural communication.

The news, therefore, provides a particularly illuminating view of the stereotypical categories and preoccupations of a particular culture. The selection and treatment of news items reflects shared stereotypes of media producers and consumers of news within a particular social context; news may be seen as a creation of a journalistic process.

It is suggested that TV news items with universal exogenous contexts are likely to be the most available and the most accessible to students. Yet before such items are used in the classroom their

appeal needs to be tested through such devices as questionnaires. And during their presentation their value as newsworthy items in the culture of origin needs to be made explicit. This was actually done in this research and related news episodes were selected based on the participants of this study. As the matter of fact, at the end of each session, the researcher asked the participants about their favorite topic for the next news item to be selected and prepared for them.

### **Linguistic Difficulty**

Linguistic difficulties are defined here under three headings of text characteristics: acoustic, lexis/syntax and text-type (which include both visual and linguistic text):

- **Acoustic:** The acoustic characteristics of a text include speech-rate, pause phenomena, hesitation, stress and rhythmic patterning.

1. **Lexis/Syntax:** TV news as a whole and news items in particular contain a high degree of redundancy. Redundancy in input is generally understood to aid second language comprehension (Chaudron, 1983; Chiang & Dunkel, 1992). Chiang & Dunkel found that repetition of constituents, paraphrase, and synonyms work best with higher levels.

- **Text Type:**

**Narrative vs. non-narrative text:** Research into native speaker comprehension of TV news suggests that viewers experience substantial comprehension and recall difficulties (Bell, 1991). Stories with a clear narrative story line tend to be processed easier than those without, but for the most part TV news is made up of non-narrative text. In L2 listening comprehension research, Shohamy and Inbar (1991) found that when they compared the relative comprehensibility of three text types: TV news broadcast using a prewritten, edited monologue, and an interactive consultative dialogue, the news item was the most difficult to process. Brown (1995) has shown that narrative texts are easier for L2 learners to listen to and recall than expository texts are, and further, events described in chronological order are easier to recall than narratives with disrupted sequences or flashbacks. This suggests that the general trend of network American TV news towards dramatic framing of news stories, news as “infotainment” and the conversationalization of TV news discourse are likely to have beneficial effects for L2 processing.

A. **The union of spoken and visual texts:** Perhaps one of the least understood features of TV news broadcasts is the combination of words and pictures, especially which has primacy in the process of decoding. The established semiotic view exemplified by Gruba (1997) is to argue for the dependence of images on verbal text or, to be more exact, the narrowing down of the multiplicity of imagistic interpretations by the spoken text. As Gruba (1997) notes, such a view appears to be rather simplistic. First, distinguishing between what we hear and what we see is not necessarily a difference between words and pictures but a difference in the way we receive the information through our eyes and ears (Meinhof, 1998). Inscriptions, captions, posters, diagrams for example appear on the visual track while the soundtrack may carry background noises and music as well as the spoken text. Second, it may be better to conceive of words and pictures creating a whole message unit rather than separate entities. Certainly, there will be instances when the linguistic text drives the comprehension of the visual input and there will also be instances where the visuals are dominant, but for the most part comprehension will depend on the interaction between the two. Gruba notes:

*Visual elements do not ‘merely’ provide support for verbal elements:  
they are better thought of as an integral element in videotext that interplays  
with verbal elements to influence a listener’s emerging interpretation. (1997,  
P.134).*

Written language is also considered a notational symbol but the degree of unambiguity between the symbol and the concept referred to is weaker. On the other end of the continuum, non-notational symbol systems like film, video and abstract art may suggest multiple meanings that may not consistently refer to specific concepts.

Meinhof (1998) has identified three ways in which text and images can be said to interrelate: overlap, displacement, and dichotomy. When words and pictures overlap they are identical or in a

metonymic relation. Text and images which can be described in terms of displacement refer to different action components, such as the cause and effect of an action. The images may be of the effects of an explosion while the spoken text discusses the causes. Other examples of displacement are the way that images can be used thematically to illustrate the spoken text or to comment on and draw inferences from the spoken text. Meinhof gives the example of a speech asking for more money to fight drugs with accompanying visuals of police raids and treatment centers, which make comments on how that money might be spent. And finally texts and images may be dichotomous where they refer to different actions altogether—the input from the visual channel may be unhelpful, distracting, or misleading.

Consequently, the degree of fit between words and images is very important factor regarding comprehension. In a research into the comprehension of video materials by native speakers, Wetzel et al. (1994) conclude that whereas audio-video material is on the whole more comprehensible than audio material, in the area of TV news the visual element is not always found to be a help to comprehension. Information recall from the news seems to be positively affected by the degree to which the auditory and visual elements meaningfully correspond and negatively affected when they are incongruent. Gruba (1997), studying L2 learners' comprehension of a Japanese TV news item found that more proficient viewers were less dependent on visuals for comprehension of the text—a finding which supports earlier work with other visual material (Mueller, 1980, Wolff, 1987) and favored the audio track if the visual element mismatched. Gruba notes that there was a sense that the listeners knew that the “real story” was in the audio track and that images were misleading. Although more proficient listeners tended to rely less on the visual elements for comprehension, they nevertheless noticed more detail in the visuals than less proficient viewers, who were far more dependent on visuals for comprehension. Visual elements were more closely attended to when they were judged to be salient or provided novel information to the listener. Gruba found evidence to suggest that images and words worked together to confirm a listener's understanding of a particular element: audio clues could be confirmed by visuals and vice-versa; visual clues could be confirmed by the spoken track.

The ramifications of the above discussion for the exploitation of TV news material in the second language classroom are therefore two folds in terms of criteria for selection and criteria for use. All news items are made up of varying degrees of symbolic, referential, schematic and iconic relationships between words and images. However, TV items which have more of an iconic or overlap relationship between words and pictures are likely to be better understood. In an overlap or iconic situation the viewer may be able to pick up cues from both image and wording. And the more iconic the relationship between words and pictures the more likely the TV news item is to provide an endogenous context. But again, as Wetzel (1994) has pointed out, it is the degree of fit between words and pictures which is crucial. In sum, the more iconic the relationship between words and images, the greater the likelihood that words and images will be self-supporting; the more symbolic the relationship between words and images (and this is more often the case with TV news), the greater the likelihood that the relationship will be dichotomous.

Tuffs and Tudor (1990) comparing native speaker and non-native speaker interpretations of visual images used in British television, argue that non-native speaker comprehension is seriously disadvantaged by their lack of familiarity with both the denotation and connotation of these images in British culture. As such the isolation of pertinent visual images can be a powerful tool for the teaching of cultural aspects of the target language. Cooper (1996) suggests focusing students' attention primarily on the visual channel and using their speculations about the meanings of these images as a way of structuring the listening task. Cooper notes that such an approach brings to the surface not only the students' knowledge of how their countries' media work but how media works in the target language culture. Meinhof (1998) suggests that such “metadiscursive” knowledge can have a wider learning effect by not only supporting language and cultural learning but also by helping learners critically assess TV itself, both in their own culture and in the target culture.

## **Conclusion**

Those elements in TV news which make a particular news item suitable pedagogical material for the second language classroom can be considered now.

First, universal exogenous and endogenous contexts are more accessible and understandable to language learners than specialized exogenous contexts, which may require more background knowledge and schema building. While endogenous contexts require little or no prior knowledge, these kinds of TV news stories tend to be less common. Universal exogenous contexts also require prior knowledge, but it is a kind of prior knowledge that language learners can be expected to already have, even though they may not have the vocabulary to express that knowledge. Questionnaires are a good way of monitoring whether students have the expected prior knowledge of universal topics such as studying, working, sleeping, etc. At the same time, an important point to remember is about expecting that the existence of a shared mental category presumes that the category will contain the same knowledge. For example, Japanese and Iranians' perceptions of carry-on luggage may differ markedly. Such divergent interpretations of the same experience might be a source of cross-cultural enquiry that could shed light on both the target and the student's own culture.

Second is the issue of criteria in linguistic difficulty. Intensive listening fulfills students' needs to work on bottom-up processing difficulties and balanced top-down approaches to listening comprehension. A selectional criterion based on words suggests that news items that use non-specialized, componential lexical sets will be easier for second language learners to handle. Redundancy of input, both linguistic and visual, are important in selecting appropriate material, and increased redundancy of input is often found in news stories with a high degree of thematic unity.

With regard to text type, many difficulties in processing TV news can be assigned to the non-narrative structure of the news. News as infotainment and the use of dramatic framing tend to "narrativize" TV news and make it more accessible for native and non-native speakers alike. A further element of text type is the mix of talking heads and voiceover visuals. Language learners may best benefit from a balance of delivery modes. And, with respect to the complex interplay of words and images, the iconic relationship of words and images is likely to have the greatest degree of fit between the visual and spoken channels, and this together with the higher likelihood that iconic word/image relationships will appear more in narrative texts, makes iconic audiovisual texts easier to process for second language learners. News items consist of combinations of iconic, schematic, referential and symbolic relationships between words and pictures. Symbolic relationships between words and images are more likely to be dichotomous, driving language learners either to seek understanding in the visual or the audio tracks depending on their proficiency.

It should be noted here that this paper tried to help the teachers in the selection of appropriate TV news material for the second language classroom. However, Nothing can be said to be one hundred percent true based on these criteria, just the claim that where these criteria coalesce, the greater the possibility that these selections will prove to be accessible and stimulating and will provide meaningful material for both linguistic development and cultural understanding.

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